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IMAGE OF WOMAN IN KARIOTAKIS' WORKS

Kostas Kariotakis is a prominent Greek poet, who lived at the outset of XX century. His works are considered valuable pieces of the so-called pessimistic stream in the Greek literature. His poetic works incorporate many interesting phenomena. Our immediate goal is to focus on one aspect of his poetry – the image of woman.

As commonly admitted, Greek literature, likewise the world literature in general, comprehensively and diversely presents the image of woman. The image arouses various attitudes – starting with adoration of a woman and raising the image to the status of a goddess, and ending with obvious charge in misogynism. Pessimist writers have created a peculiar image of woman – she is either a weighty argument for pessimistic mood or, on the contrary, the sole beam of light in the hopeless world.

The image of woman bears an important role in Kariotakis' works. It suffices to mention that twenty-eight of his poems are completely dedicated to a woman, and another seventeen have lexical formatives or implications that refer to the fair sex. It is also obvious that names rarely serve as a relevant, determining feature to create an image of a certain woman. Kariotakis mentions only the names of mythological women. No other cases – those supposed to refer to the women from the poet's empirical life – have the ladies' names. As to mythological images, only one poem may be considered completely dedicated to the goddess of love "*Μιά μέρα ηλιοστόλιστη, μιά λαμπερήν ημέρα, / απ' τον αφρό του κύματος επρόβαλες, θεά μου...*".¹ In fact, the poem is a hymn to the beauty of Aphrodite, and is saturated with the mythological spirit. In other poems, a mythological name may serve to comparison and association. Thus, the name of muse Polymnia expresses the author's attitude to a weak, ailing lady. Kariotakis presents the lady as a muse.

¹ Κ. Γ. Καρυωτάκης, «Τα Ποιήματα» (1913-1928), Αθήνα 1992, 223.

Against the background of the false passions of the deceitful world, the poet depicts a colorless, lifeless creature and says: "Κάποια μεσάνυχτα / θα σε αγαπήσω, / Μούσα..."² The poet considers Nereid the symbol of a female charm that may disappear in the sea, although its beauty rejoices the poet: "Θεότρελος, ο δύστυχος, βουιέμαι μες στο κύμα, / τα μάτια της τα θεϊκά με φόβο με κοιτάζουν / και χάνεται στη θάλασσα... Ήταν νεράιδα... Κρίμα!"³ Magdalene is presented as a female beauty associated with sensuality. It is difficult to say whether the image refers to the biblical character or a real lady called Magdalene: "Την έβλεπα στα πόδια μου μπροστά γονατισμένη: / μου γύρευε ένα φίλημα. Τ'αφράτα της τα στήθα / η πιθυμιά τα τράνταζε..."⁴

As to the poems of our immediate interest, they can be divided into four groups with four different attitudes to woman. To our mind, the most significant image of the four is that of a lady pictured as the source of aesthetic pleasure. The image stirs in the poet carnal passion, sensuality. It is remarkable that the poet presents female beauty according to the principle of picturing so-called specific, determining features. None of the poems seems to present female beauty as a harmony of inner and outer charm. They usually emphasize one or two elements that reveal the lady's fascination. Thus in the poem *Smile* the poet speaks of the lady's beautiful lips, breast and eyes that have become the source of his aesthetic pleasure: "Σα δύο κεράσια χάρισαν τα χείλη. / κ'έτσι βαθιά, γιομάτα ως ανασαίνει, / στο στήθος της ανεβοκατεβαίνει / το πλέον αδρό τριαντάφυλλο τ'Απρίλη"⁵ The poem *Contrasts* also mentions some parts of female body and renders the lady's beauty by expressing the aesthetic impression: "Όταν το θείο γέλιο σου στα χείλη σου ανθίζει / και αστράφτει μες στα μάτια σου η κάθε ηδονή, / όταν την ώρα σου μορφή τρελή χαρά στολίζει / και ξεφωνίζει εύθυμα, γλυκά μου καστανή..."⁶ Lady's hair, cheeks, hands and eyes are mentioned in *Of Night*: "...Απ' τον ουρανό ξεφεύγουνε τ'αστέρια / και σαν πετράδια ατίμητα στολίζουν τα μαλλιά σου. / Ο Γαλαξίας άσπρο φως στα μάγουλα, στα χέρια / σου χύνει μες στο γάλα του βουτά την ομορφιά σου. / Νά και τα μαύρα μάτια σου!"⁷ The elements are a source of the poet's inspiration. Most of the poems emphasize somatic perception of woman, and the beauty stirs in the poet carnal passions. This is illustrated in *Remember, Kissed, As I Caress You, The Last Kiss, You Ask*

² *ibid*, 49.

³ *ibid*, 225.

⁴ *ibid*, 231.

⁵ Κ. Γ. Καρυωτάκης, «Τα Ποιήματά» (1913-1928), Αθήνα 1992, 26.

⁶ *ibid*, 217.

⁷ *ibid*, 232.

Me,⁸ etc. Each of the poems expresses the poet's fascination for the lady's beauty, and the carnal passion it stirs: "...Τα δροσερά σου χείλη τα κεράσινα / π'ανοίγουν σε χαμόγελο, / τι ηδονή όταν κολλούν στο στόμα μου / σ'ένα φιλή ατέλειωτο! Ω, δέξου με, γλυκά μου, στην αγκάλη σου / που μοιάζει με παράδεισο..."⁹, or "Και μ'άφησες, αγάπη μου, στα στήθα σου να γείρω. / Ένας χρυσός Παράδεισος μου θάμπωσε τά μάτια, / της βελουδένιας σάρκας σου με μέθυσε το μύρο, / και στο μυαλό μου χτίστηκαν ονείρωνε παλάτια...."¹⁰

In certain cases, the poet distances the lady's image from the carnal world, adds to it some extra touches and fills it with spirituality. Thus the poem *Dedication* describes a beautiful creature playing the piano; When Kariotakis speaks about woman's voice he says: "...Δε θυμούμαι καλά, πέρασαν χρόνια, / πως είχες όμως λέω και τραγουδήσει. / εζόν αν εκελάδησαν αηδόνια. ..."¹¹ The poet, fascinated with the lady's voice is unable to hold his admiration in *As I Caress You*: "Και τη φωνή π'αργοκυλά κρυστάλλινη / σαν μουσική αιθέρα, / ποια μούσα μαγεμένη σου τη χάρισε; / ποια ζωπική νεράιδα;"¹² Again the poet speaks of the aesthetic pleasure derived from the lady's voice. However, the pleasure is beyond the somatic perception of beauty.

Especially remarkable is the group of poems in which the source of the poet's pleasure is an ailing woman. The poet emphasizes not the features that arouse carnal pleasure or passions, but the expression of her pale face and extinguished, lackluster eyes. The poet admires the faded cheeks, weakened hands. This very lady becomes the poet's muse: "...κόρη χλωμόθωρη, / μαυροντυμένη. / Κ'είναι σαν αίνιγμα, / και περιμένει. / Λάμπει το βλέμμα της / απ'την ασθένεια. / Σάμπως να λιώνουε / χέρια κερένια..."¹³ The poem *Almond Tree* is also dedicated to an ailing woman. The almond tree that grows in the poet's garden is so weak that is doomed to fading. The tree symbolizes the sick creature: "Έχει στόο κήπο μου μιά μυγαλιά φυτρώσει / κ'είν 'έτσι τρυφερή που μόλις ανασαίνει. / μα η κάθε μέρα, η κάθε αυγή τηνε μαραίνει / και τη χαρά του άνθου της δε θα μου τη δώσει...."¹⁴

In some poems, Kariotakis' attitude to woman is neutral, or just positive as to the being that fulfils her biological and social role. Thus in the poem *Seeing off* mother speaks to her child who is intimidated with hardships and complexity of life. Mother encourages him and gives him advice: "Βλέπε,

⁸ ibid, 216, 219, 241, 243, 218.

⁹ ibid, 241.

¹⁰ ibid, 243.

¹¹ ibid, 85.

¹² ibid, 241.

¹³ ibid, 49.

¹⁴ Κ. Γ. Καρυωτάκης, «Τα Ποιήματα» (1913-1928), Αθήνα 1992, 36.

παιδί μου, πάντα ομπρός. Το χτες μη σε πικραίνει. / Τώρα η ζωή σαν ύλογο στην πόρτα σε προσμένει.»¹⁵ Likewise, notions "sister" or "girls" frequently occur in Kariotakis' poetic world and render neutral or positive attitude. As an example, we shall cite the poem *Only*: "Τα ωραία κι απλά κορίτσια – ω αγαπούλες!- / η ζωή να μου τα πάρει, χορού γύρος..."¹⁶ The poem *Solitude* offers the image of sisters: "Μεσάνυχτα, και λείπετε, αδελφούλες μου..."¹⁷

The group of poems that may be referred to as misogynic creates a contrast in Kariotakis' poetry. What has earlier determined the poet's more or less positive attitude is radically changed. Kariotakis attempts to make up an image of a woman whose charm stirs negative emotions and in certain cases is even fatal for men. Let us remember the poem *Despise*, in which the poet compares the beautiful sex to Japanese puppets, speaks of their empty heads, denounces their lifestyle, compares them to monsters, and considers them nonentities: "Φθονώ την τύχη σας, προνομιούχα / πλάσματα, κούκλες ιαπωνικές. / Κομψά, ρόδινα μέλη, πλαστικές / γραμμές, μεταξωτά, διαφανή ρούχα..."¹⁸ As to the poem *Variūm et mutabile*, here the poet compares the lady's beautiful mouth to a snake's nest that produces only deception and treachery. The desperate poet doubts woman's sincerity: "Πάντοτε ψέμα / έλεγε το / ιριδοστό εκείνο βλέμμα; / Το στόμα μία / φιδοφωλιά / και στα φιλιά / τι προδοσία!"¹⁹ A weak creature becomes an image of a fatal woman in *Ochre Spirochaete*. Her lips and smile lead the poet to an abyss: "...Κ'ήταν ωραία ως σύνολο η αγορασμένη φίλη, / στο δάίλι αυτό του μακρινού πέρα χειμώνας, όταν, / γελώντας αινιγματικά, μας έδινε τα χεϊλή / κ'έβλεπε το ενδεχόμενο, την άβυσσο που ερχόταν."²⁰ Remarkably, this type of poems does not prevail in Kariotakis' poetry. They were, apparently, motivated by episodes from the poet's life.²¹

Although what unites all the groups is an image of woman, there is also a common formula implied in all of them – death is somewhere nearby: a girl of divine beauty lying on the sand and expecting death as a rescue: "Στην αμμονδιά μιά θεϊκιάκοπέλα ζαπλωμένη / -λουλούδι που μαράθηκε προτού

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 263.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 89.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 269.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 168.

²¹ As it is known, Kostas Kariotakis was infected with an incurable disease, which might have been caused by a woman. This event greatly changed the poet's attitude to the fair sex, and was reflected in his works. His physical disease and moral torture may be implied in the title of the poem *Ochre Spirochaete* and the image of "a friend for money" that portends the end for the poet.

ν'ανθίσει ακόμα -...τα θλωμένα μάτια της στον ουρανό σηκώνει / και με τρεμόμενη φωνή παράπονο αφήνει: / "Ο λυτρωτής ο θάνατος γιατί να μη σιμώνει;"²² *The Last Kiss* is the poem, which, besides a passion scene, pictures a dying woman: " ... *Νά, σήμερα πεθαίνεις! / Τά χλωμασμένα χείλια σου μου δίνεις να φιλήσω / και μου λαλουν τα μάτια σου στη γλώσσα της χαμένης / αγάπης μας: "Πηγαίνω κει, από τον ήλιο πίσω".*²³ In the poem *Of Night* a beautiful blue-eyed creature tells the poet about the approach of death: "...*Τα δακρυσμένα μάτια σου: "Τραγουδιστή", μου λένε, / "μην τραγουδάς, κ'είναι κοντά η μέρα που πεθαίνεις."*²⁴ All these poems illustrate how death coexists with life and beauty in Kariotakis' works.

All above compels us to conclude that Kariotakis, as a pessimist poet, has a peculiar attitude to woman. In the majority of his poems the image can not be considered the main source of his pessimistic mood. Moreover, we may think that the image is the stimulus that gives the poet pleasure, rejoices him, shows him the sense of life. In this respect, interesting is the fact that woman's image is associated with the so-called quasi-major mood in most of his poems. As mentioned above, the concept of death never leaves the poet, however, the fair sex is rarely a reason of hopelessness and despair. None of his poems imply that aesthetic and carnal pleasure "immortalized with death" would be the top of his delight, on the contrary, in some cases the poet emphasizes that he is saddened with a woman's death as it brings an end to his carnal or aesthetic satisfaction. Although some of his poems express misogynic tendencies, the latter can not be considered dominating mood of his works. If we compare Kariotakis' works to those by other pessimist writers of the world literature, we shall see that his attitude to woman is by no means different from the image created by the pessimistic poetry.²⁵

²² *ibid*, 222.

²³ Κ. Γ. Καρυωτάκης, «Τα Ποήματα» (1913-1928), Αθήνα 1992, 243.

²⁴ *ibid*, 232.

²⁵ If we draw a parallel between Kostas Kariotakis' poems and works by a prominent French pessimist writer Charles Baudlaire, we shall notice a number of similar traits belonging to the image of woman. Besides the numerous common features found in the poets' works, it is remarkable that both poets picture a woman as a beam of light in the obscure world: "It was a ray ...and now is night" – this is the French poet's attitude to a lady rendered in "A Lady Passing By". Interestingly, the image of woman is quite different in the poetry of Georgian pessimist writer Terenti Graneli. Almost none of his works express aesthetic pleasure and passion derived from the lady's appearance. However, what unites the three poets is their "optimistic" attitude to woman. We shall cite an extract from the Georgian writer's poem "Το Ιρα" dedicated to a lady: "Το you does the sacred dream aspire,/ there is an abyss, but something rescues me./ I wish to live if you are near,/ together with you I await autumn."